



Detail of an artwork/relic by Hermann Nitsch; essay by Selin Karaman.

On Relics, Hermann Nitsch and the Creation of Value in Art

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The first time someone encounters Hermann Nitsch's art, he or she may think that it is obscene and grotesque. However, upon a closer inspection and after placing it within context, it becomes clear that it has an exceptional kind of value. Hermann Nitsch is an artist who has been a part of the Viennese Actionism, something that is also visible in his art or, as I would rather call it, his rituals. When I speak of rituals, I am referring to his *Theatre of Orgies and Mysteries* (Orgien Mysterien Theater) which he developed in his early years along with a whole theory and philosophy about it. Since then, he has been performing these orgies-mysteries-theatres, which include the paintings he paints and exhibits. Besides the paintings, Nitsch also exhibits relics which will be the main topic of this essay, in order to enhance our understanding of the piece (a gown) that is exhibited in this show *Artists' Waste, Wasted Artists*. I will be analysing how these relics become valuable and why there is more to them than their price on the art market.

But firstly, let us have a closer look at the orgies-mysteries-theatre and why it can be called a ritual. This theatre is a sort of performance that Nitsch developed in his early years as an artist and serves the purpose of living life to its fullest and reaching the state of absolute being. In the ideal case, all the actors/participants should end up feeling the state of absolute love. To reach the desired state, several ritual-like performances are absolved which include drinking wine, people being carried into the room on crosses, slaughter of animals, mixing certain fruits and vegetables with the innards of the slaughtered animals and so on. While this might sound awful to some people, this is exactly what Nitsch aims at – he wants to show all the sides of life, including those horrible ones. As all these procedures are planned and have a very specific order that is repeated every time they are performed and have the goal of making people who take part in them reach a higher mental state, these orgies-mysteries-theatres can be called rituals. After all, as already Victor Turner argued, a ritual is 'a stereotyped sequence of activities involving gestures, words, and objects, performed in a sequestered place, and designed to influence preternatural entities or forces on behalf of the actors' goals and interests' (Turner 1977:183). As Nitsch said in our interview, religion and its rituals are the products of the society they are developed in and show how society evolved or rather what matters in that society – something that ritualist analysis can also reveal. Nitsch tries to show the diversity of life to its fullest with his art and is not afraid to show its grotesque and horrible parts also because they are in some way necessary in order to see the beautiful. Also, since he is inspired by Baudelaire, he tries to show the beauty in the ugly. His goal in doing so and the main reason why he developed his O.M. Theatre is to make people experience the state of absolute being, as I mentioned before. By this, he means experiencing life with all the senses and all its possible intensity. Therefore, the goal is to push people to their limit and make them reach a higher state of mind, which they then should apply to their lives after the ritual is finished.

This is where the relics, or else leftovers from the actual art itself, become interesting. Since the actual art is the ritual and therefore the art is over when the ritual is over, the collected and then occasionally exhibited relics could be considered of no value or



rather as waste. This, however, is not the case since only a few pieces are chosen to be exhibited as relics. These have to fulfil several criteria in order to become relics.

But firstly, let me explain what is meant here when I talk about relics. As I researched literature about Hermann Nitsch, I found a chapter called 'Relikte' which is German for relics, in the book *Hermann Nitsch: das Gesamtkunstwerk des Orgien Mysterien Theaters*. The chapter explains that relics in Nitsch's art are sorts of leftovers of something that has passed, and therefore they form an autonomous creation but are also at the same time over-worked remains of an event which brought destruction with it (Karrer 2015, 201). The purpose of the relic is to create a moment of reflexion rather than being art in itself. This reflection should specifically concern the way we live it or rather the way we could be living. He further says that the relics are there to celebrate life by being a reminder of the actual art, which is the O. M. Theatre. This can be compared to what Turner says about ritual when he talks about it as a force that can change people's thinking. Since the relics are what is left over of the force that made the people change their thinking, they gain their value in being a reminder of it. Also, they only become valuable because the people who take part in the O. M. Theatre create the value itself, no less through what they learn during the whole process and through the changes that happen in their perception of symbols. What they learn is then transferred onto the relics in a symbolic way, so one could say that the relics have a very strong symbolic value (Nesterova 2013, 23).

Hence, Nitsch's relics are pieces of the O. M. Theatre that are stored provided they fit into the Nitschian understanding of aesthetics which has its main focus on splattering of colour and spontaneity as is usual in the Viennese Actionism. They are then worked over and in some cases put into cross-like positions to remind us of their sacrality. Their purpose is to serve as dialogue creators and as reminders of the O. M. Theatre which is the actual art. Hence, besides their obvious monetary value, which they get from the art market, the relics have a deeper spiritual and symbolic value as well, which can only be understood if one deals with Hermann Nitsch's actual art, the Theatre of Orgies and Mysteries, or at least is informed about it and the philosophy behind it. Of course, someone could also understand them by the sensations the relics let one feel as they are very provocative and shocking. But it would be very hard to get down to the level of understanding of the actual art since they are only meant to be reminders of an art and are not art in themselves.

Since it is very easy to take Nitsch's art out of context and give it a whole new meaning, it is also easy to misunderstand or rather misinterpret his relics and therefore not understand what great spiritual value they contain. Therefore, people often think that his art is very grotesque and probably also label it as something lacking in value and as something that only gets its value from the art market and by the fact that Hermann Nitsch is such a famous artist that is known all over the world. But as we have seen, there is more to it than the superficial thought of value through the art market and fame. That is why it is important to look twice when it comes to art, since it can act like an encrypted language which can disguise a lot of symbolic value and also teach you a lesson once you learn to decrypt it. In this instance, it would be that the relics earn their value by being objects that remind of the act that encouraged contemplation which then leads to a realignment, which is what the O. M. Theatre does in the ideal case (Nesterova 2013).

Nitsch's relics have a great symbolic value besides their monetary value, which should not play such a big role in art. After all, art is there to broaden people's horizons, which Nitsch's art definitely does. But we live in a world that values money a lot, and hence the actual meaning of art can be forgotten very easily, that is why reflecting on questions like where does art get its value from is very important in order to remind people that there is more to art than its price.

- Karrer, Michael** (ed.). 2015. *Hermann Nitsch: Das Gesamtkunstwerk des Orgien Mysterien Theaters*. Köln: Walther König.
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